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# THE PROBLEM

## AND OTHER POEMS

BY

Benjamin Griffith Brawley

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"So many gods, so many creeds,
So many paths that wind and wind,
When just the art of being kind
Is all this sad world needs."

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In the heart of a black man there is ever a feeling of wonder. His faith bids him be hopeful, but the present makes him dubious of the future. He looks at his child or his younger brother and wonders what the end of it all will be. Those who know this may be able to understand what I have tried to say in this little book.

There is one who has lived much but whose heart is yet young, one who has suffered much but whose faith is still strong. By her my earliest footsteps were directed toward the Mount of High Ideals; and it is because I know that she is but one of many noble women who in this tide of times have high purpose for their sons that I dedicate these faltering lines

TO MY MOTHER.

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Note.—The Problem, The Education, and The Plan are here reprinted with the permission of the editors of *The Voice of the Negro*, in which magazine they first appeared.

## THE PROBLEM

Ye who have the vision, ye who know the plan
Of the stretch of empire o'er the haunts of man,

Ye who claim dominion far as man may reach,
What are these wild doctrines that at home ye teach?

What is this new notion of the lust of laws,
Sheltered by your ensign, bargained for your cause?

Farther yet and farther spreads the eagle's wing,
Louder yet your triumph bids the heathen sing;

Farther yet and farther do your footsteps go,
Each new day a harvest of the seed ye sow:

Ye who day by day are seeking for your need,
What is this ye harbor, what is this ye breed,

This the hope of glory, this the great desire,
Daily growing fatter 'neath your altar-fire?

What are these decrees your legislators make,
Striving all the founding of your code to shake?

What is this proscription, what these brazen bars,
What this fearful phantom of the jim-crow cars?

Whence these gods of fury at whose feet ye bow,
Relics of the darkness, superseded now?

Was it then for this ye sank the Merrimac,
Or is this the whole wild fabric going back—

Back across the ages to the river-brink
Where the man meets slave, where young slave-children drink?

One of your strong poets, virile and of sight,
Saw the fearful image, piteous in its plight,

Of a man of might, with muffled undertone,
Rolling, rolling, rolling up a hill a stone.

All the agitation, all the strife and woe,
All the stress and tumult forty years ago,

Left this ancient problem, reared at your command,
Shall ye try to crush this man, or bid him stand?

Was it idle speaking, was it platitude,
Do we bend the meaning, stretch the magnitude,

Of the Declaration—all the hope it meant,
That "We hold these truths to be self-evident?"

Were the fathers wrong, or did they say too much?
Was oppression such but when they felt its touch?

What are all the words here that ye fail to heed?
Can it be that folly satisfied your need:

Or is this the God-sent oracle of truth,
Purchased with your blood for all the world forsooth?

Hearts are still unchanging; what ye craved for then
Burns within the bosoms of a million men;

All ye fain would teach us by a sterner hand
Do our minds full-seeing fail to understand.

Ye who have the vision, ye who know the way,
Hear the mighty millions singing as they pray;

Heed the word the dubious present prophesies,
List the music-making as the toilers rise,

Toiling with their face full-turned upon the sun,
Rising yet and higher when each day is done.

Ye who claim the gospel, ye who know the law,
Worship ye the night, or what your fathers saw?

## THE BATTLEGROUND

Let me live close to men's hearts. In the years
When youth is full, let me know men and grow
Into the knowledge of their pulsing souls.
Not on some distant peak where in the veil
Fame tapers and the siren temples blaze,
May my days pass, but on a lower ground,
Where men of might brave dubious circumstance
Where sorrow wears the heart, would lose the soul,
Where strenuous life demands high ideals,
In lusty labor and the fight with fire,
Or sin, unlovable benightedness,
May I know men, and knowing learn to love,
And loving learn to help them in their toil.

## THE SLAVER

A Vision of What Has Been, Viewed off Charleston Harbor.

As I stand near the ripple and plash of the wave, as I stand
Where the soul of the sea throbs with passion and love for the land,
As I muse in the attar of lilies and jessamine-bloom,
All the stress and the song of a hundred years fall in the loom.

Who is that? It is Taney; John Brown is—is making a raid!
Is it Vesey that thinks? Are the mothers of Charleston afraid?
What a beautiful girl for an auction! a slave? and—hah!—she
With bouquets? Why, that's Topsy; that soldier there? Robert E. Lee.

It may be but the mist which the sea from its caverns hath wrung,
It may be but an impotent dream, undeveloped, unsung,
But that tosses and tunes a ghost-dance, and that shudders and veers,
While the pilot greets hence in the darkness the death that he steers.

And the mist settles low on the deep, and the night-wind comes down
On the heart of the sea where the myriad star-dartings drown;
Is it death—can it be?—that dim mist, and that scent from the line—
That strange vapor that mixes in heav'n with palmetto and pine?

It comes nearer, becomes more defined, and the waters let slip,
And the vasty dim blackness grows blacker; ah, see! 'tis a ship!
It recedes, it recoils like a serpent full ready to spring;
Far across the Atlantic's deep chest hear the slaves as they sing.

And the anthem spurred on by the driver rolls over the main,
And the wavelets would fain bear the wail to the home-shore again;
Surely these are thy creatures, O God, they live under thy skies—
Why, why do they shudder at even, why hate the sunrise?

Yes, here! it was here that they brought them, those captives of old;
It was here that they huddled at bell-taps, and here they were sold;
Is it scourge and the death that I fear, mine—and, Africa, thine?
No! in heav'n, mixed with beauty and blue, see Aldebaran shine!

## THE FLAG

Not though the prospect beckons,
  Not though deep-wrung by crimes
My heart grows hot within me
  In this full tide of times,
Could thrills of love impel me
  To bless another shrine,
Or clasp another standard
  Than this one so long mine.

The lot to brand injustice,
  The task of wrong to right,
Demands a surer ensign
  Than one full-bought by spite:
In vain is to disparage,
  Or e'er attempt to meet
The glory of Old Glory,
  The hope our hearts repeat.

Let not the dubious present
  Obscure the soul of things,
Let not a wayward impulse
  Breed far-fetched bargainings;
The trading made by Esau
  And Jacob each to each,
Is not to pass unheeded
  By those whom it might teach.

The hope our fathers fought for,
  The way their footsteps trod,
Is not to be forsaken
  By children of their God;
'Tis in the stress of impulse,
  The strife of clan with clan,
He proves them true believers
  And tries the soul of man.

## THE RELIGION

Go find a new religion,
  Eschew the Christ ye praise,
Let him no more be reckoned
  The keeper of your ways;
Ye men of vague protesting,
  Of scarlet heart and hand,
What means to you Mount Sinai,
  The law and God's command?

One day full-bought with fury
  The funeral altars rise,
And then to rage and madness
  Ye make full sacrifice;
And ere your work is finished,
  Or ere the pyre is cold,
The Sabbath dawns to witness
  The tale your hands have told.

Ye go to sanctuary,
  And on your bended knees
Ye lisp the Master's doctrine
  Of "Inasmuch to these;"
O dull of comprehension,
  O vain in your conceit,
What mean ye by "Our Father,"—
  The form your lips repeat?

The Master loved no seeming,
  He lived that all might see
His hate of sham and fashion
  And all hypocrisy;
How think you ye will reckon,
  How think you ye will pray,
When judgment and when justice
  Begin their destined sway?

Go find a new religion,
  Some more trustworthy creed,
Some faith your hearts will answer
  In time of fear and need,
No insufficient doctrine
  Like that of Galilee,
Some rule more worth believing,—
  Be honest and be free.

## THE LAW

*Out in the fury of the summer sun*
*In sullen silence stood the multitude;*
*Within the crowd awaiting the event*
*With nimble fingers wrought a favored few,*
*Till all was ready and a rope did coil*
*Around the victim crouching at the stake.*

What boots it that this tale was told before,—
That but another Negro is no more?
What means it that this mob in silence turns,—
That in its breast no light of conscience burns?

But this:—

Where once the dawn of Justice neared,
Behold a nation with a conscience seared;
Over the land where men on judgment wait,
See baby-fingers clasp the helm of state;
See men whose sires did Magna Carta sign,
All wanton duty to the winds resign;
Or when at midnight comes an armed band,
Behold a coward or a traitor stand!
The arm of Liberty no more in air,
Ten thousand now the Constitution dare;
And mindful but of gold or full-crammed maw,
What reck these men of freedom or the law?
And they that of democracy take keep
See those that sowed the wind the whirlwind reap;
While down the ages goes the sad refrain,
"Here once the vision of the world did reign."

## THE PEON'S CHILD

Out in the acres underneath the sun.
The full-blown cotton, after months of rain,
Breaks from the boll and longs to kiss the ground.
Wearied with pain and blinded by the dust,
A child plods slowly down the long white rows,
A sack hung on his back, and in his eyes
The press and greed of ages and the world,
But evermore within his heart a hope,
And on his lips a trill and snatch of song.

What knows this child of how to give and take,
Of syntax or of places on the map?
What does he think of Isaac Newton's law;
What does he care for Shakspere and the light?
How can he measure in the after-years
The scale of justice or be held for sin?
Around him in God's glory and the light
A passionate bird hurls its defiant soul
Forth to the clouds in mocking of the blue;
But what is this to him whom in the years
A long, long wilderness of white awaits?
Around him sings the silence of the dawn,
Above him all the symphonies of heaven;
But what to him the glory or the gleam,
What means the music of the spheres to him?

Ye men who own the cotton-fields and plains,
Who run the whirring factories and the mills,
Weaving your wealth of heart-strings and of tears,
What is the heritage ye give this child?
What will ye say in that hereafter day,
When far beyond the working of the world,
Within the circuit of a righteous judge,
He greets you in the thunder-clouds of heaven?

# THE EDUCATION

There was a time when Socrates
  The wisdom of the young men drew,
When not such leaden forms as these
  I see, were what the people knew:
But now the light the fathers burned
By other lights is overturned.

And now the Doric numbers flow
  More slowly than in elder days:
And some less ancient Cicero
  Now thunders forth in blame or praise;
To other gods than Zeus we throng,
For Homer is a wornout song.

And now a people with a zeal
  For things that they can make and see,
Forgets the lyric trance to feel,
  Hears but the anvil's clank and plea;
The heart's most sacred thrill and tone
Is sacrifice to wood and stone.

The leaders of the nations strive,
  But strive with water, air, and fire;
And day by day they onward drive
  Their sons, made mad by mad desire;
Yet as their phantoms they pursue,
I wonder if the gains are true.

Let me upon Olympus steep
  Hold forth my unimpeded way;
There may I not forget to keep
  The mystery of yesterday;
The life we live is more than meat;
Beware the creeds your lips repeat!

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## TO THE OLD HOME.

We are going back to the country,
  Away from the rush of the town.
For I've given 'em both a trial,
  And it's here that we all run down;
For the rows in the fields are calling,
  The rows of the cotton and corn,
And we're going back to the country,
  Where my father's father was born.

You see it was this way, stranger,
  When we come to Atlanta to stay—
We'd had a bad year in Coweta,
  And thought we'd do better away;
So wife and I and the children
  All talked it over one night,
And then we decided on leaving
  The farm with its uphill fight.

So not many mornings after,
  With Ed--that's my eldest son—
I come up here to the city
  To see what work could be done;
We liked the streets and the business—
  We'd seen 'em but twice before—
And where everyone seemed prosp'rous
  We looked to be mighty poor.

We rented a house over yonder
  Where you seen me a year ago;
It wasn't much like the others,
  But our means was short, you know;

And then all the rest for the money
Looked to me much worse by a mile,
And we thought that we might do better
After working and waiting a while.

So I went for wife and the children,
And brought them all here to stay;
I was glad to see 'em so happy—
My own heart was light that day;
But I tell you, I tell you, stranger,
For the town at least to speak,
It's hard to support eight children
On seven and a half a week.

First Ed got to goin' with people
His mother and I couldn't see;
We tried to break up his habits,
But the city was stronger than we;
At last he got into trouble—
All over some sort of a game—
The other fellow began it,
But they all said Ed was to blame.

Then Minnie our eldest daughter
Did not turn out very well,
And after we spoke about it
She went off and stayed for a spell;
But we gritted our teeth and stood it,
And moved over here cross town;
But the city is still the city
Whether we be up or down.

And so one after another
The long months passed somehow;
When Nancy was here I could stand it,
But I'm at my road's end now;

The way somehow seemed clearer
  When she was by my side—
But last week came a sickness.
  And then my dear wife died.

The bread's been hard in the winning,
  The city has cost me dear.
I have paid the price that was asked for,
  And I leave my heart's life here;
But I said when Nancy left us
  To rest from her pain and care,
That I'd go home with the children
  And do my best for 'em there.

So we're going back to the country,
  Away from the rush of the town,
For I've given 'em both a trial,
  And it's here that we all run down;
For the rows in the fields are calling,
  The rows of the cotton and corn,
And we're going back to the country
  Where my father's father was born.

## THE LITTLE SISTER

At sunset in the open door,
My little sister sits with me;
We watch the shadows fall before
The wood-bine and the apple-tree:
She sews a dress for baby Dot,
And I untie a tangled knot.

High up and down the golden strand
My little sister runs with me;
She tightly holds me by the hand,
And calls to watch the ships at sea;
The merry wavelets gleam and dance,
Reflected in her happy glance.

Ah, Margie, when the after-years
Bring days of wisdom to your head,
When duty calls and wisdom nears,
Shall I untie the tangled thread?
When long from now we view the sea,
How will it be with you and me?

## THE PLAN

Far above the strife and striving,
  And the hate of man for man,
I can see the great contriving
  Of a more than human plan.

And day by day more clearly
  Do we see the great design,
And day by day more nearly
  Do we footsteps fall in line;

For in spite of the winds repeating
  The rule of the lash and rod,
The heart of the world is beating
  With the love that was born of God.

## A PRAYER

Lord God, to whom our fathers prayed,
To whom they did not pray in vain,
And who for them assurance made,
Though oft repeated their refrain,
Hope of our race, again we cry,
Draw near and help us, lest we die.

The battle rages fierce and long,
The wicked seem to triumph still;
Yet all things to the Lord belong,
And all must bow beneath his will.
Lord God of old, again we cry,
Draw near and help us, lest we die.

If brooding o'er the wrongs we grieve,
Our hearts forget to turn to thee,
Or if they e'er do not believe
That thou in time wilt hear our plea,
Hope of our race, stand by us then,
And help us "quit ourselves like men."

As now we bend before thy throne,
Upon us send thy truth and light;
From us all other hopes are flown—
We pray thee, help us in the right.
Father of lights, thy mercy send
Upon us, as we lowly bend.

Lord God, we pray thee help us all
To live in harmony and peace;
Help us to listen to thy call,
And from all evil-doing cease.
Hope of our people, hear our cry;
Draw near and help us, lest we die.

## MY CREED*

I believe in faith in God, and in man.

I believe in life and in work, and in lending a helping hand.

I believe in faith, hope, and love, these three, and that the greatest of these is love.

I believe in the ultimate convergence of systems, and in the ready sympathy of human hearts.

I believe in the triumph of time, in the ordaining of the course of the ages, and the ruling of the progress of the stars.

I believe in the development of matter, in the evolution of things, in the final solution of problems, and in the ultimate unfolding of mysteries.

I believe in the failure of the flesh, in the downfall of the material, in the triumph of the invisible, and the supremacy of the unseen.

I believe in the second emancipation, in the liberty of conscience, in the freedom of the spirit, in the deliverance of the soul.

I believe in the doom of injustice, in the final failure of prejudice, in the overthrow of evil, and in the final enthronement of good.

I believe in the kinship of the universe, in the providence of Providence, in the fatherhood of God, and in the brotherhood of Christ.

*This creed first appeared in April, 1904, in The Note-Book, a school periodical formerly published in Atlanta, Ga.

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